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Primary school students' conceptions of history¹

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Abstract

The aim of this qualitative case study is to define the primary school sixth grade students' views about the quality of history and their perception of history. The "Interview Form" which was prepared by expert opinions was used in the process of gathering the data. The data were collected from 29 students who are in sixth grade in Central district of Kastamonu city in Turkey and data were analyzed by descriptive analysis approach, content analysis approach and expressive analysis approach. For a great many of students, history means past times and concepts of the past times. For most of the students, the concept of history is equivalent to the concept of "time". The students mostly believe that being a historian is "being knowledgeable". 1/3 of them stated that anyone who wants to be a historian can be a historian. And less than 1/4 of these students, emphasized on change and continuity, which are fundamental concepts for history, and stated on the continuity of time and place.

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1. Introduction

The philosophical meanings given to the purposes of history mold the aims of history teaching too. In this respect, history can be regarded either as a course programme which contributes the cognitive and sensory development of individuals or as a course programme which fabricates scientific generalizations and theories with the aim of preparing the forthcoming society with the data collected from the past (Dilek, 2002, p.33). The answers of the questions "What is history?" and "What approach should be followed in historical researches?" can also give solutions of how historical teaching should be.

Carr (2005, p.35) gives the following answer "The uncut reciprocal communication process between the historian and the facts; endless dialog between the past and the present" for the question "What is history". "The past is gone and history is the construction of the historians through working on the past. History is composed by the historians

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(or people behaving like historians) (Jenkins, 1997, p.19). Watts (1972, p.41) emphasizes that history is not a book taking place in the shelves of the library; it is a process that can only occur by the interaction between individual and historical materials. According to Jenkins (1997), history is an unsteady expression composed by historians. There is no definite comment or reading approach of the past. As the history is composed by historians; the work arisen is not the past by itself it is “an intertext linguistic establishment”

It is obvious that; it is not among the aims of history teaching that students remember or memorize the factual informations or transfer the views of the writer of the course book. The aim is to make the students acquire appropriate thinking forms and basic skills of the discipline of history. The basic concepts that can help us to understand the way the historians work and how they construct the historical information are: “continuity and change”, “chronology and narration”, “causality” and “comparison and findings”.

In order to make history teaching to contribute the students’ cognitive development; the following skills should be developed: historical sensitivity, historical understanding and critical thinking. These skills are important for the students to understand the historical concepts like; continuity and change, similarity and dissimilarity, and causality. This means that , the way followed to understand the historical concepts is not different from the historian’s way. Students should use the technics of analysis such as historical research methods, chronology and historical documents as auxiliary factors to understand the historical concepts, events and facts (Dilek, 2002, p.34).

Among the desired skills that are to be acquired by the students in primary schools through history courses, which takes place in social studies, the most significant one is historical thinking/understanding. In our country, history courses has been accepted as a boring memorizing course since quite recently it put the teacher in the center and it was based on the approach of memorizing the informations on the books. The basic point emphasized frequently by constructivist history teaching is to give the chance to the students to work like junior historians. The important thing in this point is not to ask questions about “what to teach and how to teach” but to ask questions about “how to teach to think like historians”. The concept like historical thinking, historical understanding and empathy looms large in the answer of this question. In our opinion, a study with this aim necessitates to understand the nature of the historical dicipline, to cognize the approaches of the historians, the resources that the historians use and finally to understand the development of historical thinking.

2. Purpose

The place given to the attribution of history, the changes in the paradigmas in history teaching and their reflections on history teaching is huge in the researches of history teaching. Through the change in education progmmammes since 2004 in Turkey, in teaching history, which takes place under social studies, the aim is to make the students earn; the awareness of the method of history dicipline, to develop their ability to work like historians, to compose their own historical editing, to see the historical objects and concepts in different views. In this respect, determining the students’ perceptions about history is important. This research aims at understanding the primary school students’ perceptions about history and defining their advance information and considerations of history. For this reason first of all, their consideration of “history”, the meaning of the concepts of history and historians, and their ideas about being a historian and the methods used when the historians write history, were identified.

3. Method

In this qualitative case study, an interview was made with 29 students who are studying in a public primary school sixth grade in Kastamonu. For the context of this research which concerns of analyzing the perception of history of a group of primary school students, it is required to use qualitative method.

3.1. Participants, data collection, and analysis

The study group of this research was composed of sixth grade students (6/B class) choosed randomly from a public school (Şehit Şerife Bacı Primary School) in Kastamonu city in 2007-2008 academic year. All of the students of the selected class attended the research. The class contains 17 female and 12 male students.

Data in this study were gathered using a qualitative approach that relied on semi-structured interview form. The questions were shaped with taking the expert opinions into consideration and were aimed to determine the perceptions of the students about history and to find how they give a meaning for the historian.

The answers given by the students in the semi-structured interview form were written exactly by Microsoft Office Word word processor programme; the view of the students were coded by “subjective codification” method, and together with qualitative content analysis and comment analysis were made and supported by student expressions. In the process of codification the answers of the students, the names of the students were not used and they were given numbers from 1 to 29.

4. Findings and Discussion

a) The questions asked “how would you describe history, what do you think when we talk about/say history?” with the aim of defining the opinions of the students and the answers were analyzed with descriptive analysis and content analysis methods. According to this, the meanings of history for the primary school students are grouped in the content analysis table as below:

Table 1 The meanings given to history by the students

Codification	n	Perception of History
Past Times	12	History is gone and it is over
Process continuing from the past to the present	5	Continuity
Important events	3	Entire events
Unit time	2	Definite time period
Scientific discipline	1	History as a dicipline
History of a place	1	History as a place
Course book	2	Book
Lives of important people	2	Topic
Historical object	1	Object

As it can be seen in the content analysis table (Table 1), the students gave the meaning to history as the events happened in the past on the top of the list. It can be concluded that the history has the same meaning with the mechanical time for the students, as nearly half of the students answered the question in this way. According to Jenkins (1997, p.18) history as an expression has a different category from its subject, and history and past are two different things. On the other hand, when the answers given by the students as a whole are analyzed, it can be seen that students do not think the history as past time events. For instance; some students (5) defined history as “the *time passed from the beginning of the world*”, some (18) defined as “all *events continuing from the past times*” and (24) as “the *time passed from the past to the present*”. As it can be understood from these answers, nearly half of the students emphasized the time concept in history.

For the development of historical thinking of students and for effective teaching of history, both the meaning of history and the first connotation coming to their minds are significant. “What is history in your opinion?” was asked to the students for this reason and the answers were categorized by codification and layed out in the table 2.

These findings are important for defining the emphasis of the students about the concept of history. Analysis of the table below reveals that it is noteworthy that 1/4 of the students directly emphasizes the political concepts. Almost 1/5 of the students answered that question as war. War is the answer of that question of nearly 1/5 of the students.

Table 2 The connotation of history for the students

Codification	n	Comments
War	6	
Important events	2	Event
Interesting events	1	
Memorization	4	Memorization
Ancestors	2	Past
Government	2	Past
Person	4	
Place	1	Historical Concepts
Time	2	
Evidence	2	Source
Epic	1	
Sacrifice	1	Other
Tradition	1	

b) Through the close relationship between the history and the historian concepts; it is one of the other question how they describe the historian is used to modified their historical thinking way. For this reason the question “What comes first to your mind when you hear the word historian?” is asked, and the quantitative content analysis table was composed as below:

Table 3 The connotation of the word historian among the students

Codification	n	Historiography
Science person	15	
Person who writes about past	1	Person studying history
Person analysis the past	4	
Person making researches and comments	5	Person who questions the past, makes researches – makes history-
Person who has historical knowledge	1	
Person who teaches history	2	
Person who know/see/hear	2	Person who knows/ teaches/ narrates history
Person, narrator the events	3	
Person with absolute knowledge	3	
Writer of the huge books	1	Writer
No idea	3	----

After analyzing the answers given by the primary school students (Some of the students’ answers were categorized more than one), the image of historians on their minds can be categorized in 3 main categories. The first category defines historian as the person studying history, in the second category it is the person questioning the past and making researches – making history- and in the final category it is the person who knows and teaches history. The main categories gained from the students’ answers above are similar to the definition of the historian in the dictionaries. More than half of the students defined the historian as the person who studies history, and used historical concepts in defining the historian. There are some examples of the students’ expressions:

(S.1)[Student 1] “The *historians deal with the lives of the ancient people*”

(S. 3) “ *When I hear the word historian, the first thing comes to my mind is the people who writes history and who always narrates and writes history.*”

(S. 5) “ *The person who tells the significant events happened in the ancient periods.*”

(S. 13) “*In my opinion, history is the important events lived in the past times.*”

(S. 15) “*History is a science which analyzes the old people’s lifestyles.*”

(S. 4) “ *Historians make researches and comments about the past events. They prevent the nations from living unexperienced without the knowledge of the past and they enlighten the future with the past.*”

As it can be seen above, the students used “ past period”, “ past time”, “ past people”, “ past event”, “before”, “old person” to express the time concepts. To learn about, the past it is necessary to know some historical concepts (Cooper, 1995, p.12) The students are extremely dealing with the time concept. This time concept which should be progressed is a part of their personal development. There are a important templates of the days on their minds. These templates are determined by significant days such as the birthdates, seasons and holidays (Cooper, 1995, p.8).

It is noteworthy that, less than 1/4 of the students made a close description of the historian as it is discussed in the academic surroundings. These visions take place below as:

(S. 11) “ *I can determine the historian as much as I know : Writes a book or a roman about the studies in the past. To my way of thinking, the historians make a study by researching and by filling the gaps to some extent with their imaginations.*”

(S. 23) “ *The historians make a study by researching, reading, discussing and taking information from a number of sources.*”

c) It is emphasized by recent researches that during history courses in the schools the students should study like historians to gain some skills while the teachers should not be in a position like s/he is only a narrator. Fines (Yapıcı, 2006, p.25) explains the reason why the students should study like historians as: “ The learning of history without knowing how it was written and how it reached to us,would be consisted of solely the memorization of the arguments.The effective learning can only be possible with active learning. The usage of the primary sources and the investigation of evidences give the feeling of authenticity which is rarely given by second hand history.” It is required that the students should be seen as “junior historians” as historical learning is gained by historical researches. In this respect, the following question is asked to the primary school students who are the subjects of this topic; “Can anyone, who wants to be a historian, be a historian?” The findings of these questions are important in history teaching since it is the history description of history of 12 year-old students. The subjective codification table of the answers can be seen in table 4.

Table 4: Historiography in the students minds

Codification	N	Codification	N
No, s/he can not		Yes, s/he can	
Must work hard	4	After graduation	1
Our history is huge	2	If s/he really wants	2
Curious, investigator	2	If s/he is intelligent	1
Graduation	2	If s/he is successful in social courses	1
Must have a huge knowledge	3	Researching about the past	1
Must love	3	If s/he likes it	2
Must explain	2		
Must be experienced	3		

As table 4 is analyzed, it became apparent that 2/3 of the primary school students cited that anyone who wants to be a historian can not be a historian. For most of the students who gave this answer; to be a historian, it is necessary that the person should have a lot of knowledge. Some of the comments of the students who emphasized the significance of knowledge for history, are listed below as examples:

(S. 26) “... *Anyone can not be a historian because our history would not end when it is narrated with little information. Our history will not end with tiny word tiny information because our history is huge.*”

(S. 7) “ *The person who does not have a great knowledge about history can not be a historian.*”

Some of the students emphasized the methodological characteristics of history. Although the students analyzed in this category have different ideas about “being a historian”, they have similar ideas about researcher identity of the historian.

(S. 4) “*Anyone who wants cannot be a historian. The people who are curious about history, who love history and making researches can be historians.*”

(S. 27) “*...Because being a historian seems easy but it is not so easy. First of all for being a historian you should work really hard, research about the past and work appropriate to the rules of research, should know their past very well.*”

5. Conclusion

The aim of this research is to determine the perception of history of the primary school sixth graders. Considering the data collected from the research, it became obvious that almost half of the students described the history as “the events started and ended in the past and the people in the past”. Furthermore, the students used the concepts like; event, time period, science, place, course book, historical subjects and continuity in their definitions of history. The concept used in describing the history reveals the differences in history perceptions of the students. As a matter of fact, it is proved by a research on the development and teaching of historical time concept among primary school students made by Şimşek(2006) that, almost all of the students define the concept of history with the concept of “past”. In another research made by Şimşek (2007), the whole of the participated students think that the history is related to the time. It is important in the meaning of time perception for this 12 year-old students less than ¼ of whom emphasized the basic concepts of change and continuity, and the continuity of history in time and place. Nevertheless, when the students are asked about what does history connote to them (Table 2), they frequently emphasized the concepts like; the war, memorization and important people. The emphasis of the students on the war which is a political concept, mirrors Dilek’s (2004, p.20) criticism of historians as dealing with political events and not involving the social events to the historical process. As the answers that are codified as “war” are analyzed, it is seen that the students emphasized the war names they studied in the previous social courses. To develop the perception of time and place which has a great impact in developing the concept of history of the children, the history courses should include the information, imagination and rationality of the students, whereas important people, places and dates should not be emphasized too much.

Assuming the students as “junior historians”, which is the way of constructivist history teaching, is another result collected from the students answers. When the definitions of “historian” of the students are examined, it became apparent that they explain this concept in three groups as it is written in the dictionaries. (the person who studies history, the person who makes researches and questions the past [history maker] and the person who knows the history – the person who teaches”). In fact, 1/3 of the students answered the following question “Do you think anyone who wants to be a historian can be a historian?” (Table 4) positively and they concluded that anyone can be a historian if s/he wants to be.

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